

Impact of Integrated Marketing Communication on Consumer Behaviour: Effects on Consumer Decision – Making Process

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Abstract

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) is one of the most controversial areas of research, the concept marking a constant progress from the simple coordinating of promotional tools to a complex strategic process. Further to the evolution of modern marketing, where IMC has become a major way of achievement the objectives of a company, there is a need to identify opportunities to increase its impact on consumer behaviour. Therefore, is of interest, the relatively recent approach found in the literature, according to which IMC works specifically through all the four classic elements of the marketing mix: product, price, placement and marketing communications. In this context, this paper intends to clarify some aspects regarding the effects of IMC on the consumer behaviour, materialized in the consumer decision- making process.

Keywords: Integrated marketing communication, Consumer behaviour, Consumer decision-making process, Influence, Model

1. Introduction

In a competitive economic system, survival and development of the companies involve the existence of accurate and detailed information about consumers, so the concept of modern marketing highlights the need for having detailed and founded information about the consumer needs, motivation, attitude and actions. In the contemporary era is almost universally accepted idea that the main purpose of marketing is not finding and persuading people to buy what a company produces, but satisfying the consumer, which is the essence of consumer orientation. Developing effective ways by which consumers' needs could be satisfied is one of the main objectives of IMC. Identifying the communication pathways which influence consumer behaviour is an essential marketing communications activity, the ultimate goal being the creation of marketing messages to reach target audiences through the most appropriate channels. Adopting the approach according with IMC is not part of the marketing mix, but a holistic concept using marketing mix elements to create and strengthen relationships with consumers and to send a unified message, this paper aims to clarify some aspects of the mechanism of IMC influence on consumer behaviour, reflected also in the buying decision process.

2. Literature Review

Communication, one of the most representatives of human activities and the basis for social interaction, is defined as the exchange of ideas, information and feelings.

In recent decades, the phenomenon has evolved faster communication and dramatic changes due to the increasing need for communication in all areas and technological performance.

Since communication requires converting the original concepts into symbols that can transmit the desired message (Blythe, 2006) the individual or organization who communicates has to transform first the concepts in a set of symbols that can be transferred to the receiver, who need to decode the symbols, in order to understand the original message. A correct decoding can take place only if the participants in the communication share a common experience, with at least one common language.

Communication effectiveness is determined both by understanding the message and getting the desired reaction from the part of the receiver, in response to the message (Popescu, 2002).

Marketing communication occurred during the last decades of the twentieth century, as a result on the marketing outstanding development during that period. Although so far, there is not unanimity of specialists' opinion in terms of concept content, we can talk about a consensus on the role and importance of marketing communications.

In a global market characterized by high dynamism and fierce competition, organizations try to find the most efficient way to get their word out so that customers understand the benefits that can be obtained by consumption or use products or services (Clow, 2010). Consequently, marketing communications have become a fundamental aspect of marketing, a business vision and an essential factor in successful marketing communication. Its importance have increased dramatically in recent decades, considering that the marketing and communication are inseparable, all organizations business areas using various forms of marketing communication to make their offer and to meet financial or non-profit targets (Shimp, 2003).

It can be concluded that marketing communications have a highly complex content, both in terms of scope and the objectives pursued and on methods and tools for action. Considering that the primary purpose of marketing communication is to build and strengthen the brand - while the main market competitors have become brands - many opinions of experts converge to the idea that in the contemporary era the marketing communication will be the only way to create and sustaining competitive advantage.

Given that marketing communication is more strongly assert that a major achievement of marketing objectives of an organization, appears the necessity to identify ways to increase its impact, that goal can be achieved by integrating all the specific components in an assembly unit. IMC is considered one of the most controversial areas of research, expert's opinions being found in a diverse range, whose amplitude includes very different approaches. There are point of views according with this concept is the most important development of marketing communications in the last decade of the twentieth century (Kitchen and De Pelsmacker, 2004) and views which assume that IMC does not go beyond a collection of specific concepts traditional marketing, presented in a new form (Spotts et al., 1998).

Academic research in IMC area has covered a long way since the emergence of the concept and its shape as a field of study in the late '80s and early '90s, marking a gradual transition from the limited vision that is just the coordination of promotional tools, to the broad perspective of structuring a complex strategic process. Although aspects of the definition, theoretical grounding, understanding and developing the concept of IMC were a constant concern of specialists over time, so far they have not reached a concrete result in a universally accepted definition of IMC.

Synthesizing the existing literature concerns may be outlined several main areas divided in two phases: 1990-2000 and 2001 – to present (Kliatchko, 2008). First stage is characterized by research and analysis on:

- a. Clarification of some aspects of definition, theoretical development and understanding of IMC concept (Duncan and Everett, 1993; Grein, Gould and Lerman, 1996; Schultz and Kitchen, 1996; Hartley and Pickton, 1999);
- b. Identification of strategic issues and treatment of IMC concept more of a business process perspective rather than that of a simple coordination of marketing communication tools (Schultz and Schultz, 1998);
- c. Analyze the interdependence of relational marketing concept and IMC, through the social nature of business in general and marketing in particular and highlight the key role of marketing communication in maintaining profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders (Hutton, 1996 ; Duncan and Moriarty, 1998);
- d. Measure and evaluate the effects of IMC (Pickton and Hartley, 1999, Schultz and Schultz, 1998).

In the second stage, the research is focused on:

- a. Conceptual aspect of IMC, as theoretical foundation, status and goals (Cornelissen and Lock, 2000; Cornelissen, 2001; Duncan and Mulhern, 2004; Gould, 2004; Madhavaram, 2005; Reid et al 2005; Kitchen and Schultz, 2009), including opposite views or barriers for its implementation (Cornelissen & Lock, 2000; Ewing et al, 2000; Gould, 2004, Fitzpatrick, 2005);
- b. Measurement and effectiveness of IMC programmes (Low, 2000; Reid, 2003; Schultz, Cole and Bailey, 2004; Belch and Belch, 2008, Ewing, 2009).
- c. Managerial and organisational issues (Cornelissen, Lock and Gardner, 2001; Beverland and Luxton, 2005);
- d. Relationship of IMC to internal marketing issues, relationship marketing, corporate communication, brand equity and brand identity (Barnes, 2001; Naik and Raman, 2003; Schultz 2004; Dewhirst and Davis, 2005; Ratnatunga and Ewing, 2005, Finne and Gronroos, 2009)

An IMC program must be structured in multiple strands, influencing all the processes of consumer behaviour (perception, learning, attitude, motivation), not only the actual behaviour.

The literature review reveals some well structured models of consumer behaviour, the most important of them having as main axis the buying decision process, outlined for the first time by Engel, Blackwell and Kolat (1978). This process includes basically five main stages: need (problem) recognition, information search and evaluation of alternatives, product choice and outcomes. The next improvements and changes of model (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2009) refine the initial structure, including some possible options in the fourth stage, not only purchase option and a reshaping of fifth stage, as post-purchase evaluation.

3. The Multiple Facets of Consumer Behaviour: Effects on Consumer Making-Decision Process

Research of the impact of IMC on consumer behaviour involves the analysis of the default influence exercised by each component of IMC on the stages of buying decision process. The analysis has to be founded on the intrinsic mechanism of purchase decision-making whose complexity is determined by the psychological processes involved.

According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2009), four models of consumers could be identified, based on the general view of how and why the individual behave in a specific way. The economic view presents consumer who makes only rational decisions, this traditional decision-making perspective incorporating the economics of information approach to the search process (Solomon, 2009).

This model was criticized by many consumer researchers, because nobody could have all the information required by a “perfect” decision and the rational process doesn’t accurately portray many of the purchase decision. (Olshavski and Granbois, 1989) Opposite to the rational economic view is the passive view, which considers that consumers are objects of marketing manipulation, being not able to play an independent role in the buying decision process.

The cognitive view is closer to the real consumer behaviour, depicting the consumer as a receptive and active person, who is involved in information searching and attempts to make satisfactory decisions.

Even cannot fully explain the consumer behaviour, the emotional view highlights the role of feelings and emotions in certain purchases. It reflects that sometimes the consumers act impulsive, without evaluating the alternatives for a long time, being emotionally driven. It is obviously that a model which could describe the buying decision process has to combine specific elements of all the four views, in order to include the variety of reasons which generate a specific decision.

Trying to understand the thinking of consumers, it is important to take into consideration the truth that not every time when he has to take a decision an individual completes all steps theoretically identified as consumer decision-making process. The time, effort and attention allocated to the decision-making process mainly depend on the importance of problem which has to be solved by purchasing something.

The approach of consumer as problem solvers (Howard and Sheth, 1969; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2009; Solomon, 2009), highlight the role of consumer involvement in decision-making process.

Researchers showed that a consumer evaluates the effort to make a particular choice, then think of the most appropriate strategy which best suited to the level of effort it requires, so they make a constructive processing (Bettman, Luce and Payne, 1998).

The consumer purchase behaviour may be viewed from three perspectives — the decision making, the experiential and the behavioural influence (Mowen, 1988). In the same time, according to the approach of consumer as problem solver (Howard, 1977), there are three levels of decision making: extensive problem solving, limited problem solving and routinized response behaviour.

The decision-making perspective holds that buying behaviour results from consumers' engaging in a problem-solving task in which they move through a series of stages. Decisions involving extended problem solving correspond most closely to the decision making perspective. At this level, the consumer has no established criteria for evaluating a product category or specific brands and needs a great amount of information to establish a set of criteria on which to judge specific brands and a correspondingly large amount of information concerning each of the brands to be considered (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2009). In some cases it could be also identified the experiential perspective, because even the consumers are highly involved in a decision, they can't explain entirely their choices from a rational perspective, in this situation The experiential perspective argues that in certain instances consumers make purchases in order to create feelings, experiences, and emotions rather than to solve problems. At the level of limited problem solving, consumers have already established some

criteria for evaluating the product category and the different brands in this category, but is still undecided about which set of brands will best serve him.

The consumers make some decisions under conditions of low involvement, the decision being determined by the environmental cues (Solomon, 2009), which is described as behavioural influence perspective (Mowen, 1988). The behavioural influence approach proposes that in other instances consumers act in response to environmental characteristics.

Extended and limited problem-solving perspectives involve a certain degree of information search and need a deliberation time, though they vary in the degree to which consumers engage in these activities. Unlike these two approaches, the routinized decision making is accomplished with minimal effort and without conscious control, based on automaticity (Alba and Hutchinson, 1988).

The literature review does not reveal in-depth studies which analyze the influence of marketing communication on each stage of consumer decision-making process. Psychological processes which composed the consumer behaviour could be affected and changed in many ways, due to the effects of integrated marketing communication and acting further to shape a specific decision.

4. The Model of Research the Influence of IMC on Consumer Decision-Making Process

Also, modelling the research of IMC influence on consumer behaviour is important for facilitating meaningful comparisons between different companies (in-depth analysis of competition), time etc. To create such a research model (fig. 1), had to test several variables, in terms of matching model components and its functional relationship with theoretical precepts accepted as defining IMC.

Block A - Integrated marketing communication - refers to the ways in which communication is found in all four components of marketing mix namely the product, price, distribution and marketing communications. Such influence must be founded on market research that supports appropriate market segmentation. For example, a product is designed to meet needs of clearly defined consumers' segment, it is brought to market at a certain price through the appropriate distribution channels and the marketing communications are structured in a particular way, tailored to the characteristics of the target segment. The instruments which support and organize the integrated marketing communication activities are integrated communication strategy and integrated communication plan. The integrated communication strategy is reflected in market positioning based on the objectives aimed by the company and on communication axis. The integrated communication plan is focused on choosing the specific components, taking into account their effective correlation in terms of optimizing costs.

Block B - Consumer behaviour - is composed of five dimensions through which specialists define this process, on the conceptual. These basic processes of consumer behaviour are also used by the real marketing, through the definition of operational endogenous or exogenous variables, as appropriate. The five basic processes of this block, that perception, information / learning, attitude, motivation and actual behaviour of the highly multidimensional, which is taken into account in the design and implementation of many forms of behavioural studies.

Block C – Consumer decision-making process – consists of stages through which the consumers when deciding to purchase goods and services generally accepted by experts in the field of marketing: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives (evoked set), evaluation result and when buying, post-purchase evaluation. Obviously, the stages of a buying decision are determined by product specific, consumer target segment and the particularities of the five elementary processes which composed the consumer behaviour.

The functional relations of the model are divided in three categories, as follows: main functional relations, illustrated in the model by the horizontal block arrows, which describe graphically the essential relations between blocks; secondary relations illustrated by lines, which describe structural links between components of the same block or of different blocks; feedback lines (one shows the influence of post-purchase evaluation on the actual behaviour regarding another similar purchase and the other links the Block C with Block A, as a result of the systemic perspective adopted for this model.

The multidimensional relationship between all the blocks' components, illustrated by the model, is described further.

4.1 Block A → Block B

IMC (Block A) influence on consumer behaviour processes, based on results of market research and market segmentation, is propagated by each component of marketing mix (product, price, distribution and marketing

communications), exploring its communicational potential and is reflected in integrated communication strategy and in integrated communication plan

There are many ways in which product characteristics and attributes affect the consumers' perception about it. The findings indicate that consumer's perception of products is influenced by its physical characteristics alone and in some cases, by the product attributes which are marketing communications based, derived from brand images and brand differentiation (Allison and Uhl, 1964; Foxall and Goldsmith, 2003). Price, as another component of integrated marketing communication has direct implications on the perception. There is considerable evidence that for many products consumer judges the quality by price, even consumers' subjective of price are not fully explained (Monroe, 1973; Kamen and Toman, 1970; Elliot and Cameron, 1994). Consumer perception is also related to the distribution, including type of distribution (direct or indirect; intensive, selective or exclusive) and store characteristics (Berry, 1969), namely location, design, product assortment, services and personnel. Method of distribution must be consistent with brand image and price (Arens and Schaefer, 2007).

All IMC components transmit to consumers various information, so they support the learning process by which they acquire the purchase and consumption knowledge. Learning process permanently evolves and changes as an effect of newly acquired knowledge gained from reading, observation, discussions and actual experience.

Forming or changing attitude is one of the most important goals of IMC, being influenced by product, price, distribution and marketing communications, but also resulting from direct or vicarious experience that an individual has with the attitude object (Fazio, Sanbonmatsu, Powell and Kardes, 1986).

The complex process of motivation has the force to activate behaviour, providing in the same time purpose and direction to that behaviour (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2009). IMC could globally influence motivation, especially through marketing communications component. Discovering the motives that a product can satisfy, determines the product, price and distribution key features.

4.2 Block B → Block C

The processes that describe the Consumer Behaviour (Block B) are influenced, each one, in various proportions and combinations by the components of mix marketing belonging to Block A and by the operational tools (integrated communication strategy and plan). Block B has a main resultant which reflects the differentiated and particular influence of the behavioural processes on the stages of consumer decision-making process;

The first stage of consumer decision-making process is described in the literature as problem or need recognition. It is a result of a difference perceived by an individual between a desired state and an actual state (Foxall and Goldsmith, 2003; Solomon, 2009). Perception has an important role in evaluating the actual state, because it drives problem recognition, not some objective reality. All the components of IMC have to be tailored for solving consumer recognized problem. This could involve developing of a new product or altering characteristics of an existing one, changing pricing policy, modifying channels of distribution and adapting marketing communications structure. IMC strategy must take into account the type of consumer identified problem. If there is an active problem (consumer is aware of it) has to focus on convincing consumer that a specific product is the best solution. In case of an inactive problem, the strategy aims to determine consumer to recognize a problem then offer a possibility to solve it.

The second stage of consumer decision-making, the information search is based on learning process due to which consumer has usually previous knowledge and experience related to a product (internal search). Information gathered from external sources (external search) are based mostly on product characteristics (including packaging and label) and marketing communications. Consumer's information search depends on the importance of purchase and the easiness to obtain information (Punj and Saelin, 1983; Bettman and Park, 1980).

The evaluation of alternatives stages is conditioned by the type of consumer's choice (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2009). The evaluation process is closely linked to learning, motivation and attitudes. In case of affective choice, the evaluation of a product is generally focused on the way it will make the user feel as it is used. The motivation framework in this situation is based on consumers' motives and promotion-based regulatory focus. IMC could affect this stage by coordinating the appropriate marketing communications tools to highlight positive feelings resulted from product using. A similar approach is reflected in attitude-based choice. This type of choice involves use of general attitudes and impressions or heuristics and all the components of IMC could have a contribution to attitude forming.

The third type of choice is made on a different base, requiring the comparison of each specific attribute across all the brands considered (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2009). As a result, the choice is influenced mostly by

practical aspects as product characteristics and price and is based especially on learning and motivation. Decision stage is a resultant of the previous four stages and it is materialized in consumer's actual behaviour.

Consumer decision-making process is completed with post-purchase evaluation, in which consumer compares the product real performance with his expectations. As Schiffman and Kanuk (2009) explain, an important component of post-purchase evaluation is the reduction of any uncertainty that consumer might have about his choice. This evaluation generates feedback which increases the experience level and is included further in learning process, influencing future related decisions.

4.3 Block C → Block A

The relationship between consumer-making decision and IMC is materialized in feedback. Based on consumer research, all the IMC components could be revised and improved, taking into account the main aspects resulted from consumers' feedback.

5. Conclusions, Implications and Further Research

The research of integrated marketing communication influence on consumer decision-making process is a complex activity involving in-depth analysis of the relationship and instruments through which this influence is exercised. To study the interaction between IMC components and processes that form the consumer behaviour is necessary to validate the model created for this purpose, which can be achieved using the findings of a qualitative research (i.e. focus-group) combined with quantitative research (i.e. survey). This model of study the IMC impact on need recognition, information search, and evaluation of alternatives, decision and post-purchase evaluation offers the possibility to adopt strategic marketing decisions, based on correct understanding of consumer's judgments and actions.

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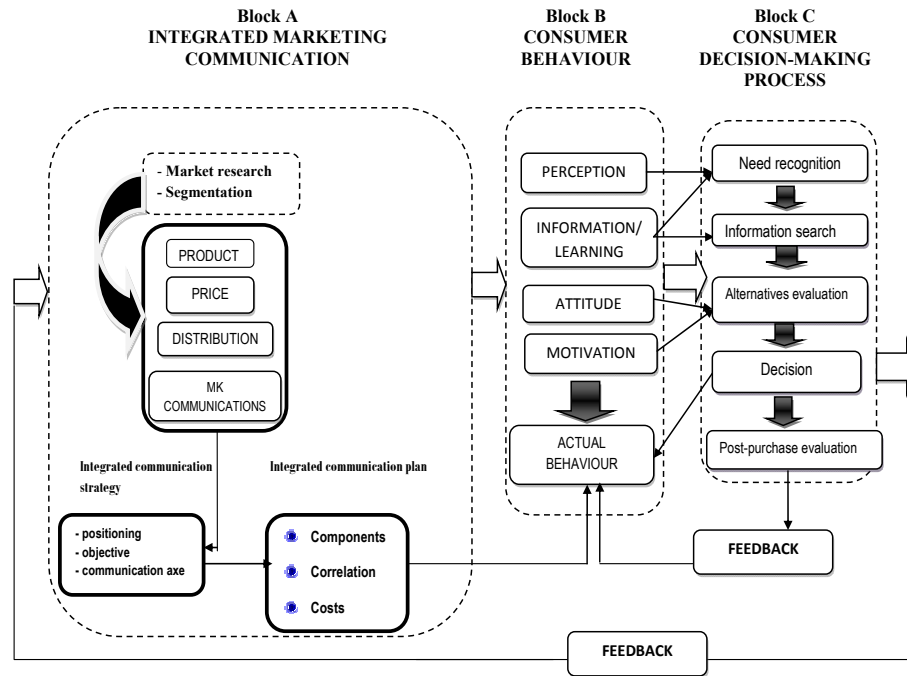


Figure 1. Model of research the IMC influence on the consumer decision-making process